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Children and poverty across Europe - The challenge of developing child centred policies

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Tess Ridge

Children and Poverty across Europe – The Challenge of Developing Child Centred Policies

Kinder und Armut in Europa –
Herausforderungen einer kindzentrierten Politik

Although poor children are often the target of policy, policy itself is rarely informed by their subjective concerns. This article takes a child-centred approach to understanding the lives and experiences of children who are poor and explores how policy interventions aimed at reducing child poverty can have both, positive and negative impacts on children's lives. It discusses one example drawn from recent UK welfare-to-work policies for lone mothers – a key element of the UK state's anti-poverty programme – to explore the tensions that can exist between policies, which seek to alleviate child poverty and the lived experiences of poor children themselves. The key argument of this article is that it is essential to locate and understand children's experiences of poverty in childhood through a direct engagement with low-income children themselves.

Key words: child poverty, poverty policies

Obwohl arme Kinder oft Gegenstand von Politik sind, ist Politik nur selten über deren subjektive Belange informiert. Um die Lebensweisen und Erfahrungen von Kindern, die arm sind, zu verstehen, wird in diesem Artikel ein kindzentrierter Ansatz benutzt. Es wird herausgearbeitet, dass politische Interventionen, die Kinderarmut reduzieren sollen, sowohl positive wie negative Auswirkungen auf das Leben von Kindern haben können. Am Beispiel von Auswirkungen der aktuellen „welfare-to-work“ Politik für alleinerziehende Mütter – einem Kernelement des staatlichen Armutsbekämpfungsprogramms in Großbritannien – werden Spannungen untersucht, die zwischen einer Politik, die Kinderarmut verringern will, und den Lebenserfahrungen armer Kinder bestehen können. Das zentrale Argument dieses Artikels ist, dass die Erfahrungen, die Kinder mit Armut machen, nur dann genau bestimmt und verstanden werden können, wenn die Forscher sich mit diesen Kindern selbst befassen.

Schlüsselwörter: Kinderarmut, Armutspolitik

As child poverty increases across the developed world it becomes increasingly likely that many children in affluent societies will spend part or all of their childhoods living in poverty (UNICEF, 2005). This article explores the changing experiences of contemporary childhoods in Europe and reveals some of the challenges that Europe's low-income children face in their everyday lives. With growing numbers of children living in poverty in Europe (ibid.), it is clear that policy makers need to pay close attention to the changing social and cultural demands of childhood in order to respond meaningfully to the needs and concerns of poor children.

The article draws on a range of research, which either uses children as the unit of observation or engages directly with low-income children and young peo-

ple to gain a subjective understanding of their lives and concerns. To begin to comprehend the meaning and experience of poverty in childhood it is essential that researchers, policy makers and practitioners develop an understanding of child poverty that is grounded in the realities of children's everyday lives and experiences. To do this we have first to talk with children and listen carefully to what they have to say. At present our understanding of the impact of poverty and our insight into how children might interpret and mediate the experience of poverty in childhood is still relatively limited. We know from quantitative research into adult outcomes of child poverty that both chronic and transitory periods of poverty are harmful to children's lives and well-being. Children who have been poor may reach adulthood suffering from a range of enduring disadvantages. However, a focus on adult outcomes overlooks the essential feature of child poverty, that it is situated in childhood and endured by children amidst their more affluent peers.

Using child-centred research with children is still a relatively new approach to the study of children's lives and the development of appropriate, ethical and meaningful research methodologies is a significant challenge for researchers. As Christensen and James (2000, p. 7) argue to engage meaningfully with children we need to "adopt practices which resonate with children's own concerns and routines", furthermore "attention must be given to the wider discourses of childhood, to the power relations, organisational structures and social inequalities which in large part, shape children's everyday lives".

The article is in two main sections. The first section explores the social and economic situation of children across Europe by drawing on a recent comparative analysis of data from Cross-Country Reports produced for the COST Action 19 programme. This section engages with the implications for poor children of changing experiences and expectations in childhood, and draws on qualitative child-centered research by the author and others to highlight the challenges such changes present for their lives. Rising numbers of poor families and children demand action and across the developed world countries are trying to develop policies, which will respond to concerns about poverty. Many of these policies will have both intended and unintended effects on children. The second section of the article discusses some of the challenges this presents for governments by using the example of UK welfare-to-work policies and their impact on the lives of low-income children in lone-mother households. This is based on new empirical data from a qualitative, longitudinal study of low-income working family life in the UK¹ (Ridge, 2007).

1. Contemporary childhood in Europe

In this first section of the paper we explore what research with children and young people who are poor can tell us about the experiences of poverty in childhood. To do so we place the experiences of children within the context of chang-

1 Funded by the ERSC (Reference RES-000-23-1079) and conducted by Professor Jane Millar and Dr. Tess Ridge at Centre for Analysis of Social Policy (CASP), University of Bath. For project website and further publications see: <http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Minisite/stayinginwork/index.html>

ing contemporary European childhoods. This is based on a recent comparative analysis of data produced for the COST Action 19 programme of research (Ridge, forthcoming). The findings are drawn from 13 Country Reports, which used a framework of broad social and economic changes to examine the economic welfare of children in each country (Jensen et al., 2004a, 2004b). They focus in particular on what qualitative research with children can tell us about the changing experiences of childhood.

As we have seen child poverty is a matter of growing concern across Europe and the Country Reports reveal that in many European countries poverty is a generational issue, with children being more likely to experience poverty than adults. Furthermore, some children are at much greater risk of experiencing poverty than others, and the risks factors for child poverty are remarkably similar across all the country reports. Children who live in families where there is unemployment or low wages are at risk, as are children who have many siblings or live in lone-mother households or in minority ethnic groups. Children who live in families, which are often pushed to the margins of society, are also especially vulnerable to experiencing poverty in childhood; these include children in traveller families and children of refugees and asylum-seekers.

Drawing the reports together reveals a complex “mosaic of childhood” from which emerge several key features of great relevance to children’s economic and social welfare (Jensen & Qvortrup, 2004). Features identified by Jensen and Qvortrup (ibid.) are; first, that these are ageing societies and this has consequences for children’s welfare, not least in relation to the distribution of welfare resources and increased risks of poverty for children. Second, children’s welfare depends very significantly on their parent’s market position. Third, the emergence of the “virtual child” opens up new spaces of childhood as children spend increasing periods on the Internet. These developments have implications for the economic and social welfare of Europe’s children and in particular for Europe’s poor children.

Here we explore these three factors as part of an analysis of data from the Country Reports, and they provide the context for exploring the economic, social and cultural aspects of contemporary childhoods. However, there has been very little qualitative research in Europe carried out with low-income children, so we cannot include all of the countries and this paper draws most heavily on the reports from Estonia, Ireland, Norway and the UK, which, to different degrees, have been able to report findings from qualitative research carried out with low-income children.

1.1 Economic patterns of consumption and employment

The Country Reports show that in each country children are becoming increasingly significant and often sophisticated and discerning consumers. In general the Country Reports identify three key areas of economic consumption for children; spending related to image maintenance and social identity, such as clothes and shoes; spending related to shared peer group activity, such as leisure goods and services, sports activities, clubs and movies; and spending on media and the development of real and virtual identities, such as magazines, videos, CDs, and mobile phones.

A key area of consumption for children identified in the Country Reports was spending associated with shared peer group activity and social participation. The commodification of childhood is particularly apparent in the area of leisure activities. The reports reveal a range of different social and leisure experiences for children in each country. However, the overall impression is of a change in children's free and leisure time and a growth in commodified leisure consumption. There has also been an increase in large corporate leisure concerns such as theme parks in Denmark and Norway and in Cyprus the growth of expensive private summer schools offering sports and leisure activities. Even in Italy where children's lives have been significantly "privatised" within the family setting, and children's experiences of social engagement outside of the family have been severely restricted, there is a growing trend towards "new" meeting spaces, where paying for "access" is increasingly the norm. In Austria children's leisure interests are changing and the traditionally strong framework of institutionalized leisure opportunities for children is declining as children increasingly see commercial opportunities as more attractive. "Social contacts with friends are an important component of children's own definitions of leisure time." (Beham et al., 2004, p. 52)

While country reports show a growing trend in childhood towards leisure consumption, subjective insights from low-income children in the UK and Ireland reveal a different story, exposing the impact that the growing commercialisation of childhood is having on children who are poor and unable to follow the trend towards commodified social participation. Difficulties in maintaining social relationships can leave children vulnerable to social exclusion and lead to fears of social isolation, dislocation and bullying. In the UK, as elsewhere, children's engagement with commodified leisure experiences are increasing with the growth of private leisure centres, expensive sports complexes, bowling alleys, multi-screen cinema complexes and so on (Mizen et al., 2001). However, the costs of participating and sharing in these experiences are expensive and children who are poor find it hard to gain access to them. These are issues that may not be of concern to more affluent children and their parents, and are easily overlooked or undervalued by policy makers.

In Ireland a study by O'Connor et al. (2002) exploring young people's use of space and time, found that children's lives were increasingly scheduled through a range of organized activities. However, research with low-income children found that these leisure opportunities were too costly and the majority of the children were not participating in them and were more likely to spend their free time "hanging around" in local towns and shopping centres (Daly & Leonard, 2002). The financial and structural barriers to shared leisure consumption mean that children who are poor also risk becoming too visible in their societies, and thereby subject to adult scrutiny and censure. For young people living in rural areas of Croatia "poverty is boredom" and a lack of money and transport means that they feel they cannot socialise with other young people. For young people in the city being poor was experienced as a loss of future goals and resulted in "mindless sitting around with friends" (Raboteg-Šarić, 2004, p. 554). Elsewhere, the Italian report reveals that in regions in economic difficulty a growing band of foreign children have become more visible on the streets due both to their identifiable "difference" and the progressive disappearance of Italian children from the streets.

To satisfy their consumption needs children need financial resources and they are increasingly gaining access to their own money. Overall, the reports show that the majority of children across all of the different countries tended to gain access to autonomously controlled income from three primary sources; pocket money; extra payments for birthdays, academic success etc., and earned income from work. This access to financial resources is important for children as it gives them some autonomous control over material goods and other economic and social opportunities. Research with children from Ireland, and Norway show that low-income children experience considerable constraints in their access to pocket money and autonomous income (Daly & Leonard, 2002; Cantillon et al., 2003; Sandbaek, 2004). Studies with low-income children featured in the UK report also reveal the difficulties children have in gaining access to regular pocket money (Shropshire & Middleton, 1999; Ridge, 2002). When children do receive some pocket money, they identified it as an important element in maintaining their social status and social acceptance. In Ridge's (2002) study children were using their pocket money to stay socially connected, for transport, school activities, buying clothes and meeting up with friends. For these children, pocket money was a vital source of autonomous income that allowed them to share in part in the everyday activities and culture of their friends. Here is Nicole explaining what she uses her pocket money for:

"Bus fares going into town, sometimes I save it and like try and like save enough money to get like a new pair of trousers and that takes me ages." Nicole, 13 years old (ibid., p. 42)

However, pocket money depends on gifts and favours and ultimately on family resources, so many children move towards greater financial autonomy through part-time paid employment. As Hengst (2001, p. 23) argues, although children's employment is "primarily an expression of their drive to consume, it is equally an expression of their striving for autonomy and (social) identity".

The Country Reports reveal a range of employment experiences for children and, as would be expected, employment was age dependent with older children undertaking the most work, except Denmark where it is common for children from the age of 11 to 12 to supplement their pocket money with income from employment. Adult "ownership" and control of working space means that children's access to employment is legally restricted. Yet, as the German report highlights, pressures to acquire consumer goods and mobile phones can lead to increasing transgressions of employment law. In Bulgaria there are signs that almost all working children are employed illegally and often during school time.

Therefore just as children's overall economic well-being is significantly tied to their parents' labour market positions, so are children themselves increasingly drawn into certain sectors of the labour market. Low-income children are particularly at risk of undertaking illegal employment. The Irish report confirms the trend towards increasing employment amongst children, including research evidence of significant levels of employment among 12 year olds in Dublin (Whyte, 1995). The Irish report also reveals the link between receiving no pocket money and working. This was also apparent in a study of low-income children in the UK where low-income children who were not receiving pocket money, were likely to be in part time employment, or looking for employment (Ridge, 2002). Qualitative studies with low-income children in Ireland,

Estonia and the UK all confirm the importance of employment for children who are poor. Although employment empowers children and allows them to gain a degree of inclusion and participation that they would not otherwise have, it is not without risk, and there is considerable tension between children's employment and expectations and requirements of schoolwork. Children themselves are not unaware of these tensions and often have difficult choices to make between their present social well-being and their academic performance and by extension future economic well-being (Ridge, 2002).

1.2 Social-image maintenance and social identity

Evidence from the cross-country reports shows considerable commonality between children in different cultures about the importance of clothes and the consumption of image and lifestyle items. For example, the Norwegian report highlights a study of children's consumption patterns that shows clothing and shoes as key purchases particularly for girls (Brusdal, 2001). A key area in which children and young people attempt to construct their own identities and lifestyles is through consumption and the diversity of ways in which meaning can be endowed upon consumer goods (Miles, 2000). For younger children the need to "fit in" and feel part of the prevailing peer culture is strong, and research with children has shown that they are under considerable pressure to wear "acceptable" clothes from an early age (Middleton et al., 1994; Ridge, 2002). Clothing, bags, shoes and personal accessories are culturally and symbolically powerful markers of both individuality and belonging. In common with low-income children in the UK, Norway and Estonia, low-income children in the Irish report were also struggling to be included in their peer groups and fearful of being bullied or rejected by their peers if they were unable to fulfill the requirements of accepted norms.

"Look at these crap runners [trainers] I'm wearing. My ma can't afford to get me the right ones and it's terrible when you can't afford the right ones. You have no choice but we couldn't afford it so I was the one that got picked on." Susan (Daly & Leonard, 2002, p. 137)

The construction and maintenance of appropriate image is considered to be an essential prerequisite for chosen peer group inclusion and the formation of secure social identities. Children's need for financial resources and their desire to attain certain commodities reflect not just the 'common culture of acquisition' (Middleton et al., 1994; Daly & Leonard, 2002), but also the significance of consumer goods as a means of communication between young people (Willis et al., 1990; Miles, 2000; Hengst, 2001). Children who are concerned about their lifestyles and their clothing are often fearful of being isolated and seen as different or "other" (Ridge, 2002).

1.3 Cultural-virtual childhoods

Throughout all of the cross-country reports, there is evidence that children's use of ICT and the Internet is growing. There was significant spending on media and the development of real and virtual identities, such as magazines, videos, CDs, PC games and mobile phones. The burgeoning market in mobile phones and the growth in access to PCs and the Internet signal the emergence of new cultural forms in childhood. Mobile phones and the Internet provide new modes

of connection to other children, freed of the temporal spatial considerations of conducting relationships in “real” time and location. They also spawn new ways to escape from adult control and spatial surveillance (Childress, 2004). Research by Valentine and Holloway (2001) reveals the central place that virtual technologies have come to play in children’s lives and the way that children use cyberspace to conduct, develop and maintain their friendships and social networks.

Across Europe, children are finding new spaces of childhood and the ‘virtual child’ is becoming increasingly common. These virtual childhoods are characterised by alternative landscapes of imagination, and accelerated opportunities for the development of virtual identities, which evolve and are produced and reproduced in “real” and “virtual” space. For example, in Estonia as elsewhere, there is a relatively high level of ICT and Internet use, computer games and mobile phones are very popular amongst children. There are even “network parties” where children get together and bring their own computers.

However, as children’s social lives are increasingly developed, explored and negotiated in the world of virtual time and space, new sites of social exclusion are emerging through unequal patterns of access and the unsustainable consumption demands of fashion and high tech accessories. “On-line worlds reproduce class and gender divisions, and the economic and temporal realities of children’s everyday lives impact upon the nature and the extent of their on-line activities.” (Mayhew et al., 2004, p. 437) Social disadvantage mediated access in many of the countries including Italy, Austria, Ireland, UK, and Estonia. For low-income children cyberspace represents not a new opportunity but potentially a new danger, a new form of difference and exclusion.

2. Policy interventions – the impact of anti-poverty policies in practice

It is evident from the previous section that childhood across Europe is changing and low-income children are experiencing those changes in different ways. The growth of commodified leisure experiences and the opening up of new virtual spaces and identities present real challenges for poor children who are striving to stay connected and fit in with the lifestyles and expectations of their contemporaries. How countries support poor families and develop policies to address the needs of low-income children is clearly an important issue. Furthermore, as child poverty starts to rise in many European countries, the situation of poor children and their families becomes an urgent policy issue. However, policies directed towards the relief of poverty may have a number of different underpinning objectives and there may be a lack of clarity about how such policies might affect children’s lives. They may be focused on children but not necessarily child-centred – which means putting children’s subjective needs and concerns at the centre of policy formulation for children.

Often the policy focus on child poverty has been driven by data on poverty outcomes, a concern with the futures of children who are poor. Although outcomes of childhood poverty are significant in their own right, a dominant conception of children as future citizens and workers rather than children experiencing poverty in the immediacy of childhood leaves us without any textural insight into childhood itself. The future well-being of children as adult citizens and

workers is the key priority of a “child-centred social investment strategy” as outlined by Esping-Andersen (2002). However, positioning the child as the “citizen-worker” of the future rather than the “citizen-child” of the present has profound implications for children’s lives and the quality of life that children experience in childhood (Prout, 2000; Lister, 2003). Crucially policies to address child poverty need to engage with the experience of poverty within childhood, and the quality of childhood that children are able to enjoy.

2.1 Policy interventions in the UK – the effects of welfare-to-work policies on children

In the UK, as elsewhere, poverty is a generational issue and children are disproportionately more likely to experience poverty than any other generational groups. During the late 1990s, the proportion of children living in poverty peaked at 35 per cent, and although poverty rates are now slowly falling, poverty is still an enduring factor in the lives of a substantial number of the UK’s children. As a result of the high numbers of children living in poverty, the Labour government committed itself to eradicating child poverty within a generation and a range of policies have been implemented towards this end (Cm 4445, 1999). Although there have been some increased financial support for children in workless families, Labour’s key policy goal has been focused on reducing child poverty through welfare to work measures such as the introduction of Child and Working Tax Credits and the operation of New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP).

These policies form significant elements in the government’s drive towards increasing lone-parent employment to 70 per cent by 2010 and eliminating child poverty by 2020 (Thurley, 2003; Cm 4445, 1999). Therefore, the UK has a government clearly committed to eradicating child poverty, but not necessarily developing policies, which will adequately address the needs and concerns of low-income children. Although the current Labour government has shown a commitment to listen to children and is trying to increase the overall participation of children in policy matters (CYPU 2001; Hallett & Prout, 2003), there has been little or no engagement with children in relation to the generation of welfare-to-work policies for lone mothers, even though such policies will inevitably involve considerable change in children’s lives.

Underpinning these two policy objectives – increasing lone parent employment and reducing child poverty – is an assumption that employment is the best route out of poverty for children and their families. The presumption that welfare-to-work presents the best solution to child poverty is largely unchallenged. Yet how low-income children – especially children in lone-mother families – manage and make sense of the social, familial and emotional changes attendant on their mother’s entry into paid employment is vital to understanding and addressing this particular aspect of childhood disadvantage.

This final section of the paper reports findings from a new qualitative, longitudinal study of low-income working family life. The study involves interviews with 50 low-income lone mothers and 61 of their children and explores their expectations and experiences of paid work over a period of several years. One of the key aims of the study is to hear children’s accounts of their lives before and after their mothers move into – what was for many mothers – low-waged

employment following a period of social assistance. It explores children's perceptions of the material and social impact of their mother's employment and examines how children feel about their mothers working. It also takes a critical look at the social and material context in which children's experiences of poverty and low-waged employment are located.

This paper focuses on the first round of interview data from the 61 children in the study. There were 31 girls and 30 boys, six children came from minority ethnic backgrounds and a further five had dual heritage. Interviews were carried out in various areas of England, both rural and urban. The children were aged between eight and 15 and their mothers had all left social assistance for employment within the previous 12 months. Of the 50 mothers in the sample, nearly half had experienced some form of change in their employment circumstances in the first 10 to 12 months since leaving social assistance (Millar, 2006). This range of experiences and outcomes give an indication of the challenges and uncertainties that a move into employment presented for these families at this time.

2.2 Children's experiences following their mother's employment

Overall most of the children in the study appeared to have financially benefited from their mother's move into the labour market. Certainly children in the study whose mothers had managed a relatively secure move into employment expressed the belief that they were generally financially more secure. Their accounts of their lives at home and at school revealed a beneficial increase in social activity and improved school engagement. These children expressed a general satisfaction with their present circumstances. Many of the concerns identified by children in relation to their previous experiences on social assistance were eased by the increase in income generated by wages and tax credits.

This increase in income was acknowledged and appreciated by children – they felt financially “better off”. As well as material improvements, children's social lives were clearly benefiting from increased expenditure on their activities at home and at school. At home, more money in the household allowed access to clubs, cinema and other leisure activities from which they had previously been excluded. Many children had started local sports clubs or were going swimming regularly, whereas previous experiences of activities had tended to be sporadic and irregular for children. Increased social participation was also evident in school where improvements in income had made a significant difference to some children's lives. This difference was mainly evident in children's capacity to go on some trips and buy materials for school. A further positive aspect of their mother's move into employment – identified by some children – was a rise in social status. For children who have experienced poverty and the dangers of stigma and social exclusion, the increased status of having a parent in paid work provided a welcome boost to their own self-esteem.

Where mothers had moved into insecure or unstable employment the situation was very different, especially for children whose mothers had been unable to sustain employment for a variety of reasons and had left the labour market. These children were not showing the increased signs of well-being and buoyancy that was evident amongst the other children and they expressed renewed

fears about social exclusion and difference. The impact of these repeated moves on children's well-being is still little known or understood. For these children their mother's attempts to enter the labour market had resulted in an increased sense of loss and insecurity overlaid with the added experience of disappointment.

2.2.1 Mediating factors affecting how children felt about their mother's employment

How the children made sense of their mother's move into work, and the transformations they felt it had brought for them, and their families, was also a critical issue. Exploring the changes in family life that followed employment reveals that children's lives were very complex and their experiences tended to be mediated by several key factors. These were not discrete elements but rather overlapped and intersected with each other, revealing the both positive and negative dimensions of change.

These factors included their age, for example, older children were likely to be managing their own care, and taking on a more adult role in helping to ensure that family life ran smoothly. For younger children their mother's employment had often meant upheaval and change in family caring practices and the organisation of family time. For most of them this had meant either childcare or being cared for by relatives or older siblings.

Another factor was changes in income and security. Although mothers were now working, they were, in general in low paid employment. Although some children like Colin (10) saw clear links between their mother's employment and increased financial well-being:

"When me mum started working again, we started getting toys and we were going out again, and the food started to build up again." Colin (Ridge, forthcoming 2007)

Others like Clarke (10) had hoped for a greater improvement and were disappointed. Clarke's family never had *"nowt in"* and were struggling to cope financially. Work had held out some prospect of change so he had wanted his mother to work to *"change our life, 'cos we were real poor"*. However, despite the small gains he feels have come from his mother working he still feels very disadvantaged. They are better off than they were *"but all the stuff goes real quick"*. He does not get any pocket money and still lives in a very degraded environment.

Another mediating factor was changes in family time and family practices. Children whose mothers worked mainly school hours tended to be some of the most buoyant. In many ways these were the children for whom employment itself was having a minimal impact on their everyday lives. However, just over half of the children had mothers who worked full time, nights or irregular hours. Although most of these children still identified a number of positive outcomes from their mother's work, such as more money and improved status, but they also reported more negative changes in the length and quality of time they could spend together.

Childcare was also a key issue, and many of the mothers had tried to arrange their employment within school hours. Informal care was often provided by friends, relatives and grandparents and although this can work well for chil-

dren, there were signs that it could also severely disrupt their social time with neighbourhood friends. For families who did not use informal care the type and quality of childcare available to children was problematic and children who were attending formal childcare expressed some dissatisfaction with it indicating that it was often inappropriate, and unsuitable. Some children were also involved in dense schedules of childcare, moving between a range of formal and informal childcare settings during the week, and this presented considerable spatial, social and temporal challenges for them.

Finally, children were also very concerned about the well-being of their mothers. Even some of the children who were generally happy and felt their economic circumstances were improved expressed concerns about their mothers being tired and stressed at work. This created some dissonance for children between their perceptions of financial advantage for themselves and their families and their concerns about the physical and emotional costs of managing employment for their mothers.

2.2.2 How children negotiated and managed change

It is evident that their mother's employment had brought considerable change in children's lives and that these changes were experienced in a variety of ways. Children were not merely passive receivers of these changes but were active and resourceful agents within their families. They were actively negotiating and managing the demands of working family life, and in many cases played essential roles in sustaining themselves and their families. In this endeavour their previous experience of poverty was a key factor. Having endured periods of poverty and disadvantage when their mothers were out of the labour market it was evident that many of the children had strong incentives to try and sustain their families in their new "project of work". To do so they were engaged in a complex range of caring and coping strategies that endeavoured to ease some of the pressures and tensions that low-income working life could generate in their family lives (Ridge, 2006). These kinds of strategies are largely concealed and easily go unnoticed and unacknowledged, yet they can have far reaching implications for children's lives and well-being.

Three main strategies were evident from the children's accounts. First, there was the assumption of extra responsibilities including housework and chores, undertaking self care and in some cases sibling care, and, for some children, the provision of emotional support, sharing some of the worries about the heavier financial and emotional challenges that working lone mothers can face. Second, there was a degree of moderation and policing of their own needs and desires. This was a key strategy for children trying to cope with continuing feelings of financial insecurity. This was particularly the case for children whose mothers were no longer working, or where bills remained ever present and pressing. Third, the children were accepting and tolerating considerable changes in family time and caring practices.

The role that children play in making parental employment work is often overlooked in policy – where discourse often characterises children as burdens or barriers to be overcome if mothers are to take up full employment – but children's contributions to supporting family cohesion around work and care are often significant factors in whether or not families can sustain work. If chil-

dren dislike their childcare, or become vocal and distressed by changes in family life brought about by work, then the project of work can falter.

Whilst it is evident from the findings that policies to encourage lone mothers into employment may well be one way of addressing some elements of childhood poverty. It is also the case that the type and quality of work available to mothers, and the quality of childcare and support available to children must be key considerations, if policies seeking to promote employment for lone mothers are to produce security and long-term well-being for their children. Furthermore, when welfare-to-work policies fail and mothers leave the labour market, children – after a brief period of enhanced income from work – find themselves returned to the deprivations and insecurities of life on social assistance. Children's accounts indicate that they find this backward and downward move particularly hard, and are left with a sense of loss and anxiety, including in some cases uncertainty about the value of work. While paid employment continues to be disproportionately rewarded in relation to the unpaid caring work of mothers then the downward move from work to unemployment and social assistance is potentially a particularly damaging one for children.

These findings present a challenge to policy, especially where children themselves, for a variety of reasons, may be absorbing some of the negative costs of welfare-to-work policies directed at lone mothers. Only with a greater understanding and sensitivity to the complexities of family life and the ways in which policies may play out in children's lives, will better more informed policies be developed which can start to meet the needs of low-income children in working families.

3. Final thoughts

Each of the two sections of the article has sought to contribute to our understanding of the challenges that low-income children face in their everyday lives. By taking a subjective approach to child poverty, one that is informed by children's lives and experiences, we are able to gain some understanding of the meanings and realities of poverty and disadvantage in childhood. The first section of the paper drew on the COST Action 19 programme of study, which looked at the economic and social welfare of children in Europe. This highlighted challenges that the commodification of childhood and accelerated growth of virtual childhoods present for poor children across Europe. In the second section of the article we looked at the example of one important policy initiative in the UK – welfare-to-work for lone-mothers – and explored what impact policies targeted at low-income families could have on children within them.

Throughout this paper, we have taken children as the unit of enquiry and placed their subjective accounts central to the analysis of childhood poverty, and childhood continuity and change. Both sections of the paper expose common and enduring facets of poverty. It is evident that low-income and disadvantaged children struggle to share in the social, cultural and material expectations that their more affluent peers take for granted. They can easily find themselves on the margins of their societies excluded from opportunities and constrained by their life circumstances, and despite their agency and resourcefulness, their childhoods are necessarily organised around the constraints of poverty.

ty. "Therefore any understanding of childhood poverty, while encompassing the discourse, agency and identity of the child, must also recognise the social, material and cultural boundaries, constructions and institutions that shape the life worlds of children who are poor." (Ridge, forthcoming)

These are key messages to policy makers. As child poverty rises and governments across Europe search for policy formulations that will address the needs of poor families it is crucial that the child's perspective is taken into account. Childcare policies, expansions of family services and activation policies are key areas of policy where children will be directly affected by the programmes of reform put forward. Without a child-centred approach to developing such policies, they may exacerbate differences and divisions between children. The experience of poverty in childhood is damaging and the effects of poverty may ripple on in children's lives even when their economic position starts to improve. We have looked at one example of a policy targeted at reducing child poverty and see that even policies intended to improve children's lives can have perverse effects and may negatively impact on children. Policies made without an informed understanding of child poverty and/or children as active social agents may well fail to address their needs and concerns, and in turn fail to provide the support and opportunities that they so richly deserve.

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